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ABSTRACT

Recent societal changes have forced public education to assume many responsibilities that have been the traditional role of parents and family. The sheer number of pressing social problems, their multifaceted nature, and the lack of resources are particularly problematic for rural school districts. The Southeast Kansas Education Service Center (ESC) has established a wide range of prevention services to accommodate the unique needs of rural school districts while recognizing the importance of district autonomy. Each of ESC's projects has been developed through the cooperative efforts of many rural school districts. These projects have evolved into a comprehensive support system that assists schools with the implementation of health and prevention services. Specific ESC prevention services include: (1) staff development and training focusing on alcohol and drug abuse, life skills development, positive alternatives, and social policy; (2) dissemination of instructional support materials, such as computer software, instructional television programs, and science materials; (3) development of the K-12 Healthy Living Curriculum; (4) curriculum development and staff training related to special education prevention services; and (5) application of educational technology to prevention education. (SV)

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Meeting the Prevention Needs of Rural School Districts*

Introduction

Recent demographic, technological, and social changes have forced public education to assume many responsibilities that have been the traditional role of parents and the family. Evidence of these changes is best illustrated by the wide range of social issues being addressed by rural school districts. Issues that can be taken from a list which includes, but is not limited to teenage pregnancy, Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS), substance abuse and school-aged dropouts are representative of the type of problems that confront rural school districts. In a limited sense, these issues can place school officials in a tenuous public relations stance while responding to patron pressures regarding local concerns or problems. From a much broader perspective, these issues contribute to the ever expanding role of public education in the overall socialization of youth (Elias and Clabby, 1988; Wynne and Walberg, 1985-86; Stephens, 1981).

The shear number of social trends to which public education must respond is problematic for rural school districts. Much of the difficulty stems from the multifaceted nature of social problems and the lack of resources to assist rural school districts in implementing programs that meet the social and academic needs of students. Of equal concern is the fact that issues such as human sexuality and AIDS education are accompanied by a wide range of social, moral, and legal implications. This creates difficulty for school officials in establishing curricula that recognizes differences in community and individual definitions of appropriate instructional programs.

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Rural school districts also face a number of issues when considering the adoption of any type of social issues or prevention curriculum. These issues tend to fall within one of two general areas. The first regards funding for prevention programs. Despite state and local pressures to implement prevention curricula, many school districts must contend with budget constraints which limit the feasibility of adopting many commercial programs. The need to reduce existing instructional services in order to accommodate prevention programs creates an unfortunate dilemma for many school districts. The second issue relates to the plethora of instructional materials and programs that are available to rural school districts. Identifying appropriate curricula that includes adequate staff training and instructional media support is made extremely difficult due to the overwhelming number of programs that are currently marketed. Related to this issue is the need for school officials to endorse prevention instruction that is consistent with district curricular goals and objectives and the values of the community.

In response to recent educational trends, the Southeast Kansas Education Service Center (ESC)-Greenbush, has established five projects designed to facilitate the implementation of comprehensive prevention programming in predominately small rural school districts. Although each of these projects maintains distinct programming objectives, they are related in the sense that they coordinate the prevention efforts of a large number of Kansas school districts. This coordination allows for a wide range of prevention and instructional services to be available to rural school districts that would otherwise be unavailable due to cost or limited availability. The importance of local autonomy with respect to curricular decisions is also a central component of each ESC prevention project. To this end, project services have been designed to give school districts instructional options to those issues which may be construed as sensitive or controversial. Elements of human sexuality education such as the teaching of body parts and contraception are probably the most vivid examples of instructional areas that require decision making at local level. The overriding goal of this approach is to encourage local involvement and flexibility regarding instructional development, without sacrificing the integrity of effective prevention programming.

Prevention projects operated by the Southeast Kansas Education Service Center have evolved into a comprehensive support system which assists schools with the implementation of health and prevention services. Specific services that are provided range from administrator and teacher inservice training to the acquisition and dissemination of high quality audiovisual materials through an established Instructional Media Center. The end result of these efforts has been the establishment of prevention programming that is supported by trained district staff and is accompanied by diverse instructional services.

Staff Development and Training

The first step in the implementation of comprehensive prevention programming is that of staff development and training. Many elements of social issues instruction requires that educators have substantial information regarding specific youth oriented problems; as well as the theory and practice of life skills and prevention education. Staff development activities in Southeast Kansas are facilitated by the efforts of three consultants assigned to the Southeast Kansas Regional Prevention Program. Established in July of 1987, the Regional Prevention Program is one of seven prevention centers established as part of Governor Mike Hayden's Anti-Drug Abuse Plan. The Regional Prevention Program is partially funded under a grant from the Department of Social and Rehabilitation Services, Alcohol and Drug Abuse Services.

Specific staff development activities provided by prevention staff are designed to meet the unique needs of each of the 29 school districts served by the Regional Prevention Program. Teacher inservice is conducted at the ESC and also at the building level. Generally speaking, inservice training activities facilitate prevention instruction by reviewing classroom strategies that can be incorporated by teachers to prevent and reduce lifestyle related health problems. Inservice training typically focuses on four core areas including alcohol and drug information, life skills development, positive alternatives, and social policy. Research commonly identifies these areas as critical to the prevention of alcohol and drug abuse (Moskowitz, 1988).

Additional inservice training opportunities are made available through the Southeast Kansas Drug Free Schools and Communities Consortium. Comprised of forty-six rural school districts, this consortium is the result of districts pooling funds made available through the Drug Free Schools and Communities Act (1986). Inservice training provided through this project tends to focus on consortium-wide workshops conducted by state and national prevention consultants. The Drug Free Schools and Communities Consortium has also allowed for training in specific prevention programs developed by private foundations and other state agencies.

Together the Southeast Kansas Regional Prevention Program and the Drug Free Schools and Communities Consortium offer specific inservice training and technical assistance to over 2,500 teachers and 31,000 students of forty-six Kansas school districts. In addition, these programs have facilitated prevention training for over 2,000 teachers, parents, and community members throughout the 1987-88 school year.

Instructional Media

It is critically important that inservice training be supported with media and other forms of instructional support materials. The goal of assembling a Prevention and Health Audiovisual Library was assumed by the Southeast Kansas Drug Free Schools and Communities Consortium. The purpose of this library is to provide access to current, high quality instructional media and computer software in the areas of life skills development, health, and substance abuse prevention. Without the cooperative effort of consortium members, a majority of instructional materials that are currently included in the library would not be available due to high costs. In fact, it is anticipated that by 1989, the Prevention and Health Audiovisual Library will include instructional materials in excess of $70,000.00.

A unique feature of the Prevention and Health Prevention Library is the manner in which it has been integrated into the ESC Instructional Media Center (IMC). The IMC serves Southeast and Central Kansas with a media loan library. The purpose of the IMC is to provide a collection of high-cost media to primarily small rural school districts. The IMC is evolved from a basic film library to include comprehensive instructional television programs, computer software, science materials, and other instructional support programs to benefit students and educators. Over 5,000 titles of the most current instructional media are disseminated to 3,000 teachers in sixty-five school districts through delivery vans and established mail-out system.

Curriculum and Instruction

Staff and budget limitations prohibit many rural school districts from actually developing and obtaining curricula which addresses current issues which impact youth. In light of these constraints, the ESC established the Healthy Living Prevention Curriculum Project. The Healthy Living Curriculum is a Kindergarten through twelfth grade model which integrates instruction in the areas of life skills, alcohol and drug information, and human sexuality and AIDS. By integrating a number of social issues that impact youth, the goal of the Healthy Living Curriculum is to promote healthy lifestyles and reduce destructive behaviors. Specific component goals include: 1) to develop effective life skills; 2) to develop an understanding of the effects of alcohol and drug use; and, 3) to promote an awareness of human sexuality and AIDS as well as other sexually transmitted diseases.

Instruction included in the Healthy Living Curriculum has been designed in such a way that it may be modified and adapted to meet the curricular goals and objectives of local school districts. The advantage of such an approach is that teachers and curriculum committees can easily identify and implement comprehensive prevention instruction that otherwise would be very difficult or expensive. Of equal importance is the fact that the Healthy Living Curriculum includes specific grade level training that is provided by ESC prevention consultants. In addition, the curriculum includes access to a wide range of audiovisual materials that are available through the ESC Instructional Media Center. The training and audiovisual support greatly enhances the ability of teachers to effectively deliver prevention instruction. There are currently fifty-six Kansas school districts and educational agencies that participate in the Healthy Living Curriculum Project.

Additional Services and Concerns

Special Education

Virtually every definition of high risk and at risk students includes reference to special education students. This has created an interesting paradox in the fact that there are very few instructional materials and training opportunities that specifically address the unique needs of special education students. With the assistance and input of the four Southeast Kansas special education cooperatives, a Special Education Prevention Project was established to address the wide range of issues that surround the delivery of prevention instruction to students with special needs.

The Special Education Prevention Project provides contributions to prevention programming in two distinct, but nonetheless related areas. The first contribution is related to the modification of the Healthy Living Prevention Curriculum for identified exceptionalities. An important component of this objective is working closely with the curriculum and advisory committees of the four special education agencies in Southeast Kansas to insure that the modifications will meet local student and community needs. The second contribution is related to specific staff development activities designed to assist special and regular education staff to expand the quality and quantity of human sexuality, alcohol and drug, and other forms of prevention instruction provided to special education students.

Utilization of Technology

The increased utilization of compact disc and other forms of technology is rapidly becoming part of mainstream education. The application of this technology represents the means to greatly expand the effectiveness of prevention instruction.

A unique means to apply technology of health instruction is found in the Life Education Center Mobile Unit, the latest prevention project established by the ESC in the fall of 1988. The LEC Mobile Unit is a 36-foot trailer designed specifically to travel from school to school as a mobile classroom. The LEC Mobile Unit is equipped with high technology teaching aids to present a wide range of health and substance abuse prevention programming. Instruction in the LEC Mobile Unit is delivered by a certified elementary education teacher who travels with the unit. In addition to the direct instruction that is provided to students, the LEC teacher represents an invaluable resource that assists educators at the building level.

The primary goal of the LEC Mobile Unit is to expand and enhance existing health and prevention instruction in Southeast Kansas. It is particularly noteworthy that instructional programs delivered in the Mobile Unit will complement inservice training and curriculum services provided by the Southeast Kansas Drug Free Schools and Communities Consortium and the Healthy Living Curriculum Project. While the LEC Mobile Unit is not a comprehensive prevention program, it does represent the means to augment a district's prevention programming and provide additional support to students and staff while utilizing the most current education technology. The LEC Mobile Unit currently serves over 13,000 students in grades kindergarten through fourth in thirty-two Southeast Kansas school districts.

Summary and Discussion

Rural school districts face social issues that are both varied and complex. The approach of the Southeast Kansas Education Service Center has been to establish a wide range of prevention services to accommodate the unique needs of rural school districts. This recognizes the importance of district autonomy with respect to curriculum and programming decisions that surround prevention education.

Each of the prevention projects operated by the ESC have been developed through cooperative efforts of a number of rural school districts. The benefits of this cooperation lies in the ability of the ESC to offer services and materials that otherwise would not be available. This addresses the limitations that face many rural districts in terms of gaining access to instructional materials and training that specifically deals with the range of social issues that face public education. The manner in which district prevention efforts have been coordinated and consolidated could undoubtedly serve as a model for other education agencies that provide services on a regional and state-wide basis.

Additional benefits of ESC prevention projects originate from the manner in which services respond to recent social and economic trends. There exists a pervasive need to prepare students to effectively cope in an increasingly complex society. As rural school districts continue to be asked to respond to a wide range of social and health issues, the need to expand prevention instruction in a thorough and cost-effective manner will continue.

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